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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000940

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SUBJECT: FORMER PM ANAND DOWNBEAT ON ADMINISTRATION BUT
OPTIMISTIC ON EVENTUAL RETURN TO DEMOCRACY

REF: 06 BANGKOK 5832 (ANAND ON COUP)

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Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun told the Ambassador he was concerned by the Surayud administration's lack of competence. In a February 14 lunch hosted by the Ambassador, Anand suggested the cabinet should be reshuffled. He did not object to the current political role played by the Generals who launched the September coup. He expressed contempt for deposed Prime Minister Thaksin but did not feel Thaksin could stage a political comeback. Anand suggested the authorities should begin moderating public expectations for constitutional reform. Conditions in the South appeared to be improving, but it would take years for violence to taper off. He expressed concern that the King had few friends or trustworthy advisors. He appeared satisfied with the state of the U.S.-Thailand relationship. End Summary.

NO CONFIDENCE IN THE CABINET

12. (C) The Ambassador, hosting Anand for lunch on February 14, opened the discussion by asking whether he remained as hopeful about the post-Thaksin era as he had appeared in their September 21 meeting (reftel). Anand flatly replied, "no," saying he was "quite concerned." Anand expressed great disappointment with Prime Minister Surayud's cabinet, saying it included a half dozen people whom he (Anand) would never have appointed. He identified Thirapat Serirangsan, Dhipawadee Meksawan, and Nitya Pibulsonggram as among the weaker figures, although he generalized that the cabinet consisted of "all lightweights, if not flyweights." While Deputy Prime Minister Pridiyathorn Devakula had previously struck Anand as a potential Prime Minister, he had managed to commit political suicide with a series of policy blunders. Overall, Anand said, the administration had "no national agenda, no strategy, no management skills, and no guts."

13. (C) It would have been better for General Sonthi Boonyaratglin to have appointed a Prime Minister with a civilian background, Anand suggested. Doing so would have allowed Sonthi to dismiss the Prime Minister if necessary and establish a new, more effective cabinet. Because of Surayud's military background, and his recent service on the

Privy Council, it was politically impossible for the Council for National Security to push Surayud out of office. While Anand respected Surayud's integrity, he complained Surayud had failed to coordinate the cabinet's work and impose a sense of collective responsibility.

14. (C) Both Surayud and Sonthi were somewhat shy, Anand noted, and they did not know how to maneuver in political circles. Given his own experience as a successful two-time appointed Prime Minister, Anand decried the failure of (unnamed) key administration figures to consult him until late January.

15. (C) Citing Anand's recommendation in September that the coup council dissolve itself after appointing the civilian government, the Ambassador asked Anand's assessment of the present role played by the Council for National Security (CNS). Anand observed that the CNS's role was not very significant, but he said the situation might worsen if the Generals were to abandon their current political responsibilities, since the civilian administration was so weak.

THAKSIN AND THAI RAK THAI

16. (C) Anand said he was relatively unconcerned about the prospects of loyalists of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin sabotaging the referendum on the new constitution (likely to take place this fall). He believed Thaksin -- whom he considered a "pathological liar" -- would prove unable to resurrect his political career, having been fully discredited by his own missteps and blunders. Nevertheless, Anand recommended that Surayud spend more time visiting the Northeast and other pro-Thaksin areas. Surayud should not only adopt an agenda popular with the rural voters, but he

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should employ a no-holds-barred approach -- similar to Thaksin's -- in order to discredit the former regime. This could be done most effectively by showing that Thaksin had been anti-Royalist.

17. (C) The Ambassador asked Anand's view of recent defections from the Thai Rak Thai party (septel). Anand said he did not trust these old style politicians; they were all corrupt and "part and parcel of the Thaksin regime." In the future, they should be marginalized.

CONSTITUTION

18. (C) Asked to provide his views on the draft charter, Anand stressed that the constitution should improve the system of checks and balances, and strengthen traditions essential to democracy, like freedom of speech and freedom of the press. A constitution was not sufficient to provide democracy, however, as Thailand would also have to develop values such as accountability for public officials. The Thai people could not expect a perfect constitution, Anand noted -- any draft would have loopholes, and the authorities should work now to moderate popular expectations. Anand hoped that the Constitution Drafting Assembly would see its role as improving the 1997 Constitution, rather than starting from scratch. He also predicted that the fight over whether Buddhism should become the state religion would prove draining, as it had during the drafting of the 1997 constitution (which Anand chaired).

SOUTH

19. (C) Anand said he had had occasion to speak with Surayud recently, at a large gathering, and he had conveyed to Surayud that the government's policy toward southern Thailand was on the right track. It would be important to convey to

the Thai people that they could not expect an instant solution, and violence would continue. Anand envisioned a five year timeframe to bring the situation in the South back to one of relative normalcy. He acknowledged that he did not know well the current situation in the South, but he stated that both Buddhist and Muslim leaders there welcomed Surayud's visits. With Thaksin-era "ultra-rightists" (like Samak Sundaravej and Dusit Siriwan) no longer stoking a "hate campaign," nationwide ethnic tension had decreased.

PALACE

¶10. (C) Anand said he was less concerned about the King's physical health than about his ability to receive objective advice and to benefit from the company of friends. Anand remarked that half the people who work at the Palace did so only to acquire status and peddle influence; only around one-third of those at the court were there solely out of devotion to the King. He said the King was lonely and, for the most part, could not select the people with whom he spends his time. Anand considered it fortunate that the King still benefited from the company of Princess Sirindhorn every evening.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked Anand about rumors that he had turned down an offer to join the Privy Council. After a long, poker-faced pause, Anand noted that if he were to accept such a position, he would have to give up his positions on various corporate boards, in order to avoid a perception of possible conflicts of interest. He also would have to accept limitations on his ability to present his views publicly. Finally, he did not feel drawn to the ceremonial aspects of such duties.

U.S. POLICY

¶12. (C) The Ambassador requested Anand's view of the U.S.-Thai relationship. Anand said he disagreed with USG actions in Iraq, but he had no qualms with America's policy toward Thailand. He asked whether it might be possible for Surayud to be invited to Washington. The Ambassador replied that no such invitation would likely be forthcoming. Nevertheless, the USG remained committed to friendly relations with Thailand. The Ambassador noted his

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expectation that U.S. forces would join the Cobra Gold military exercise this year. He added that, if the administration wanted to improve the climate with the USG, it should lift martial law throughout the country.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Had Surayud or other top administration figures flattered Anand by soliciting his views, he might have been less blunt in his criticism. Nevertheless, we believe his derision is not simply the product of a bruised ego, but warranted by the administration's lack of focus and lame performance. While history is unlikely to assess Surayud's government as approximating Anand's, we believe the key measure of success for this interim administration is not how capably it manages affairs of state, but whether it promotes a peaceful and orderly return to democratic governance. On that most important issue, Surayud may still succeed.

BOYCE